



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Plane Shopping

A journey to find the perfect airplane

BY JEFF SKILES

MY GRAND SEARCH FOR A NEW aerial conveyance has come to an end. Well, to call it a search just may be giving the entire exercise too much credit. More like endless hours scouring online aircraft listing sites imagining myself at the controls of just about any, and sometimes every, airplane that caught my eye.

OUT WITH THE OLD

As devoted readers of this column—I hope devoted anyway—you will recall that I moved on from my wonderful cabin Waco about a year ago. A finer more honest airplane could not have graced the skies. I probably wouldn't have thought of selling it at all except my long-time friend in the hangar next door, we'll call him Larry, peddled his very similar Waco UEC to a gentleman from Germany. Larry talked me into buying my Waco YOC in the first place. In fact he convinced the previous owner to sell it to me when he wasn't even contemplating such an action.

It seemed like a rare find at the time, but as the years wore on I began to wonder exactly how large, or more to the point, frighteningly small the resale market might be for a big radial engine taildragger from the 1930s. And, I was getting tired of soaking up the oil on the hangar floor with kitty litter bought in bulk. Radial

engine aficionados just said the Waco was marking its territory. The YOC marked its territory a lot!

So, when Larry sold his Waco I took it as a sign, a call to action. Larry managed to sell his airplane remarkably fast through a high-end WWII fighter broker who inexplicably was branching out into low-end antiques. Putting my concern for the sales agent's stunning lack of business sense aside, I called and discovered that he would be happy to list my Waco. I wasn't really expecting anything to happen. In fact I thought it would languish on the market for years. The thought that I would actually have to part with my Waco never really entered my head. I just thought that I would be assuaging my conscience by "trying" to sell it all the while fully expecting to still be a Waco owner five years down the road, but it sold faster than I could have imagined.



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This unwelcome turn of events left me in the less than enviable position of owning a hangar but no airplane to put in it. I had to go one way or the other. Sell the hangar, or buy an airplane.

IN WITH THE NEW

So this is how I found myself burning the midnight oil looking at innumerable can't miss aircraft that would be just about perfect for my needs. The only problems being that "my needs" are a moving target.

The airline pilot in me wanted to define a mission, a purpose for owning an airplane that would certainly make the exact make and model that would fulfill my desires abundantly clear. Problem is I have no particular reason to own an airplane at all. Not that I let that keep me from defining hard and fast requirements. I imagined myself with a nice IFR ship, but the truth is I have no place to go. Four seats were absolutely

necessary even though I made only three flights in my Waco with more than one passenger onboard. A little more speed would be nice, but of course I like to see the countryside slip by beneath my wings, and slower can often be better for sightseeing.

So I continued to peruse the photos and ads on the Internet and occasionally flipped through the pages of the odd *Trade-A-Plane* that happened to come my way.

I started out thinking about a Cessna 170. I even mentioned so in a column awhile back and received numerous calls and e-mails from members with 170s for sale. I learned the differences between a straight 170, a 170A, and a 170B. I thought a 170 would make a nice economical airplane that would satisfy my strong internal need for practicality. I'm not much of a dreamer I'm afraid.

Unfortunately my Cessna 170 purchase was benchmarked by a just missed sale of a really nice B model with an almost new

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engine. It was selling for a very reasonable price, but someone else had looked at it the night before I called, and prior to my making the two-hour trip to see it, it was gone.

I continued to search but never could find one that quite measured up. That probably saved me from buying a common example on the spot. But something else happened that took my search in new directions. I went flying with my veterinarian in his Cessna 170B with a 180-hp engine and



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STOL modifications. Suddenly a common 170 didn't quite make the grade. I now wanted a short takeoff and landing performer that could shoehorn itself into any cow pasture. Visions of landing on gravel roads in Utah or mountain strips in Idaho filled my head.

The problem is that Cessna 170s with big engines are as rare as hens' teeth. Or at least they were last fall. Like classic cars and RVs, most people sell their toys in the spring. Supporting them through the winter with little hope for further use going forward apparently drives people to Barnstormers.com. Right now there are several attractive examples for sale. But of course now is now, and then was then.

One cruel fact of aircraft shopping became almost immediately apparent. Desirability and distance from one's front door seem to be a Machiavellian match. The good ones all seem to be in California...I live in Wisconsin.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE JOURNEY

The good news is that I like to look at airplanes. So much so that I began to wonder if maybe actually buying one would somehow be a disappointment. When you haven't actually slapped the cold, hard cash on the table, all options are open.

As time went on I began to despair of ever finding an acceptable Cessna 170, so I expanded my search. I tried to like Stinson 108s. A nice, solid machine, but the Franklin six-cylinder engine scared me off. I briefly imagined myself as a Maule man, but I was concerned that Maule men might be few and far between, and resale potential is an important quality for me. I finally settled on Cessna 180s. After all it's just a big 170, and there seemed to be several examples conveniently available right here in the Midwest.

So now every evening I would peruse my list of Internet aircraft sales sites looking for 170s, 180s, and after awhile I decided to

throw in 185s since they are just a 180 with a big engine. Still, the airplane search was less than promising. I looked at a few 180s and found that there is no shortage of prime examples with exceedingly low compressions, ratty interiors, and title or STC paperwork problems. Been there, done that.

One day I happened to be in Reno, Nevada, with a little free time on my hands. There was a bright red mid '50s 180 for sale represented by a very nice salesman. Most salesmen are nice—at least the successful ones. So I found myself in the salesman's car headed for a field south of town. It was a good plane but a bit pricy for what it was. Sensing my reluctance on this particular Cessna, the salesman casually mentioned that he also had a Cessna 195 available. At once the clouds parted and light streamed down from the heavens. Cessna 195s have always been my absolute favorite airplanes: sleek, fast, and major classic appeal. The



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45-minute drive to another airport seemed like a day, but it produced the plane of my dreams. It had beautiful maroon paint and a spacious interior. The exquisite bump cowl tightly corralled a powerful seven-cylinder Jacobs radial. I was in love as I imagined myself winging across the Midwest in such a fabulous machine.

I had the checkbook halfway out of my back pocket when the owner and I began discussing the proper place to leave the prop on shutdown to evacuate the oil. His prop was not positioned just right, and as soon as he pulled it through to place the No. 1 blade over the No. 7 cylinder, it promptly spewed out what seemed like a pint of oil onto the floor. That's what I was trying to get away from in the Waco. I prefer an airplane that keeps its oil on the inside, not on the outside. The checkbook quickly slid back into my pocket.

On New Year's Day I flew to Charlotte, North Carolina, and then drove three hours to look at a 1974 Cessna 185. It was a jump plane and was still set up as such. The owner was a jumper not a pilot, and when it came to a test flight he just gestured toward the plane and said, "Take 'er up."

"You mean alone," I said incredulously.

"Yeah, I won't be much help," he said.

And so I went up for a test flight. It still had the jump door installed, which in my view is

of limited utility. I'm sure it was of great benefit to those whose sole desire is to throw themselves out of an aircraft, but I just don't see myself departing the plane by similar means. The 185 was certainly a possibility but more something to keep in the back of my mind rather than the object of a purchase on the spot.

KISMET

But then a couple of weeks later I found myself in Phoenix. There were two 185s available for me to look at. The one I really liked had a onetime STC for a turbocharged engine out of a Cessna T210. We flatlanders are suspicious of turbochargers; we have plenty of air available and don't want the maintenance headaches of blowers. But I liked the plane otherwise. It was painted in a sort of cranberry-violet color that I hoped might grow on me over time, and I walked away thinking I had a contender.

The second 185 had a nice new paint job and new interior, but it was almost too pretty for a Cessna taildragger. I couldn't imagine landing it on a grass runway, and forget about *off* airport. It was a civilized man's Cessna 185. This Skywagon was like a pristine pickup truck, and there's something that's just not right about that. I didn't even think about a test flight and went home imagining myself at the controls of a turbocharged cranberry-

violet taildragger roaring around the back-country strips of Idaho.

But I just couldn't get past the onetime turbo STC. I didn't want a one-of-a-kind aircraft. Remember, the practical side of me demanded something that could be resold easily, and unique aircraft aren't that at all. I just couldn't quite pull the trigger, but then the salesman for the pretty Skywagon began to call.

Frankly, it was probably third on my list, but the salesman's persistence began to sway my thinking. It was a well-equipped IFR machine. It had new paint and interior. It had reasonable time on the airframe and engine, relatively little battle damage for a 185, and came equipped with a STOL kit and vortex generators—they're supposed to allow you to land shorter. Most importantly, this 185 was the cheapest!

As I thought about it, I began to sour on cranberry-violet, and the jump plane was no longer even in the cards. Maybe something that grows on you slowly lasts longer in the end. The "pretty" Skywagon began looking better and better. And so after a few phone calls and e-mails I was committed to a new tenant for my hangar, and my third aircraft ever, a sharp-looking 1968 Cessna 185 Skywagon. *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA 336120, is EAA vice president of communities and member programs.



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